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# News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **World's Muddiest Academic Contest Introduces Students to Soil and Range Health**

**Stillwater, Okla., June 17, 2016**—With mud caked boots, furrowed brows and dusty clipboards, over 500 high school students hushedly sidestep each other through a maze of tiny plastic flags and trenches cut into the bright red soil of the Oklahoma prairie. The peculiar scene has been a May tradition in the outskirts of Oklahoma City for 65 years.

The [National Land and Range Judging Contest](#) is the culmination of local and state contests where FFA and 4-H teams use their knowledge of soil science and rangeland ecology to evaluate the land for agricultural and residential uses. At the national level, the best teams from over 30 states compete for the championship trophy. Along with several state agencies and organizations including the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and conservation districts, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) technical staff have helped run and officiate the contest from the beginning.

"This contest is an excellent opportunity to introduce youth to the land from a management and technical perspective. For kids who are already interested in natural resources, this gives them a solid scientific foundation to continue pursuing their interests," says Steve Alspach, NRCS state soil scientist for Oklahoma.

Perhaps no one understands the unique impact of the contest better than Don Bartolina, retired NRCS district conservationist for Oklahoma County. He got involved with the contest when he began working for NRCS as a soil scientist in 1961. By 1985, Don was contest coordinator—responsible for making sure all the moving parts of the contest come together—and he's never missed a contest.

"The contest was part of my NRCS training," says Don. "When you're out there and the kids are asking questions, that's when you learn."

In his time with the contest, at least 27,000 students have traveled to Oklahoma to compete, but for him, it's not just about the competition, it's about introducing youth to the natural world. He admits many of the competitors won't go on to be involved in agriculture, but thinks there's still value in their participation.

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“It gives kids an appreciation for the land,” he says. “When you think of all the state and local contests that lead up to this, the number of students and coaches involved, it’s rewarding to know you’ve had some impact on their lives.”

The contest is comprised of three events held concurrently at the same secret location. In the land judging event, contestants enter several three to five foot deep pits to evaluate the qualities of the soil and determine its potential for agricultural production. Range judging contestants rotate through roped off rangeland sites to identify plant species and determine the site’s value for cattle production and quail habitat. Homesite evaluation challenges contestants to determine the value of a site for residential development.

Don is quick to remind people that while he’s the coordinator, it takes the time and resources of numerous organizations to make the contest possible. To touch so many lives every year requires the close cooperation of several public and private partners.

“It’s a labor of love,” says Don. “There’s not another contest with this many people from so many places working for the same thing. I hope it continues and I hope new people can get involved and keep it going.”

With the [65th annual contest](#), now under his belt, Don can look to other volunteer activities he participates in for Oklahoma County Conservation District and, of course, planning for next year’s contest.

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Suggested photo captions:

Land Judging 1- Land judging contestants use pocket knives to determine topsoil depth in a practice pit at the Lake Arcadia Conservation Education Area in Edmond, Oklahoma. The contest has been held every year for 65 years despite blistering heat, rain, ice and tornadoes.

Range Judging 1- Range judging contestants check their plant identification notes during the 2015 contest held on Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribal lands in Concho, Oklahoma.

Don Bartolina 1- The 2016 National Land and Range Judging Contest marks the 55th contest Don Bartolina has assisted with, and the 31st he has coordinated. He stands here in a soil pit among several contestants practicing their land judging skills on the first of two practice days ahead of the official contest.